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# Go to Hell

Yes, we went to Hell, and went for a swim in a bubbling stinking green pool with a dead body for company. But we saw some pretty parts of Iceland, too

Story and Photography: Linda van Wijk



This is Hell. There's a corpse to prove it

**T**he green water was bubbling and smelled like rotten eggs, but then you don't get the opportunity to go for a swim in Hell every day, so our clothes came off and we slid into the warm sulphurous water. Someone then mentioned that there was a dead man's body lying somewhere in the lake, which certainly didn't make us feel any happier. We carried that sulphurous smell around with us for the next three days.

The lake called Hell is in the crater of a volcano, one of many peppering the

interior of Iceland, and just one of many stunning sights we encountered on our journey around this amazing island, a cross between glistening paradise and arctic wasteland.

Hjalte Magnusson, of the 4x4 Club Reykjavik, had told us to 'follow the weather.' Since it was raining in the south we decided to drive up to the northernmost point of the island.

Husavik, with its bright colourful houses and picturesque harbour set against a backdrop of snow-capped peaks, is a typical Icelandic town. We left the Jeep and sailed the Northern Ice Sea in an old oak fishing boat. The captain and his daughter explained: 'We don't know if we'll see whales today, it's not a zoo, you understand.' After a good hour of gazing at the horizon in the freezing wind the boat is suddenly surrounded by ten Minke Whales, blowing, flipping their tails and swimming around the boat. We can almost touch their glistening black backs, as they swirl past, as if curiously watching us. They are the smallest type of whale, at 10 metres in length they're just as long as the boat.

## Going to Hell

Back on land we regain the Jeep and drive 60 miles across empty black lavafields. Our goal is the Askaja, which is a collapsed volcanic crater.

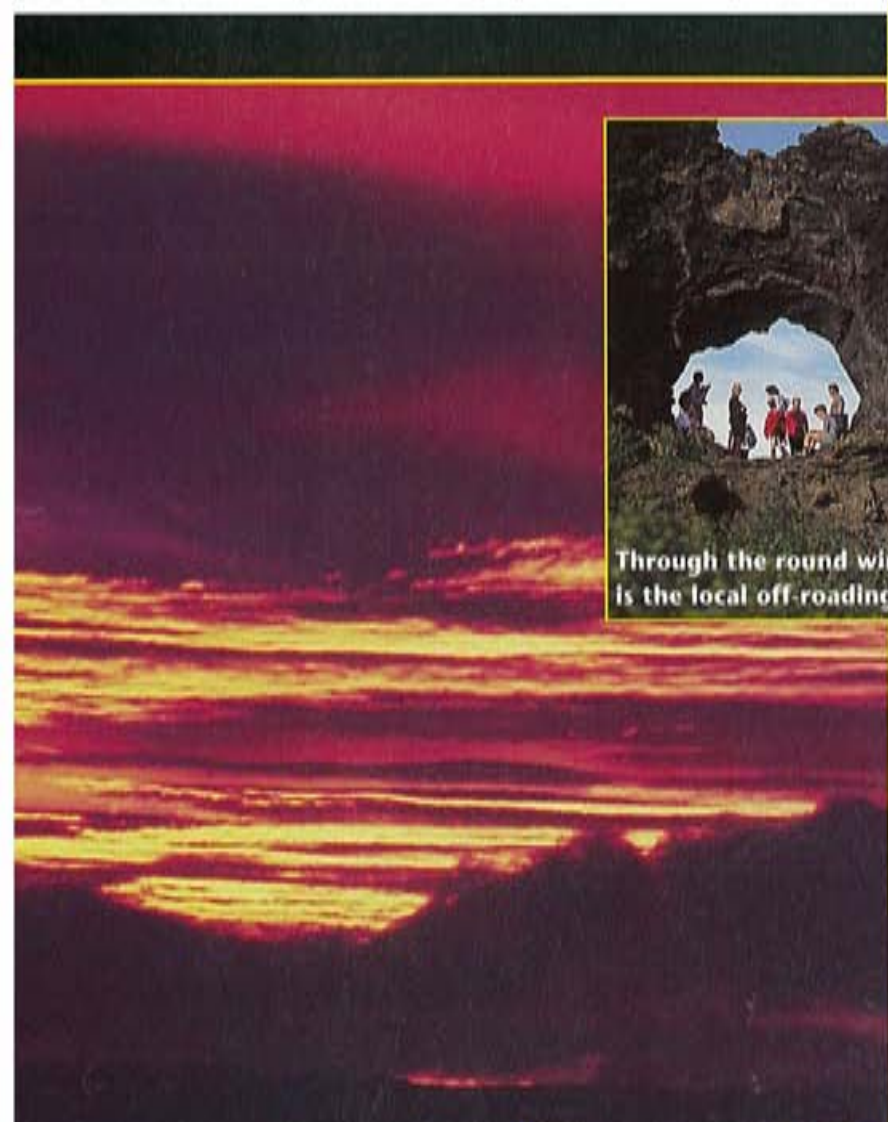
The immense lavafields covering this region of Iceland are the result of two enormous eruptions, the most devastating of which left Iceland covered in smog for two years and sent ash particles circulating all over the world.

Driving across the black plains it's very easy to imagine the destructive power of volcanoes as they completely cover land and homes under their boiling orange stream of molten rock. And it could all happen again, because this area is still volcanically active.

I feel as if I'm on the moon, the Jeep looking like a dinky toy on the narrow road winding between the strange black rock formations.

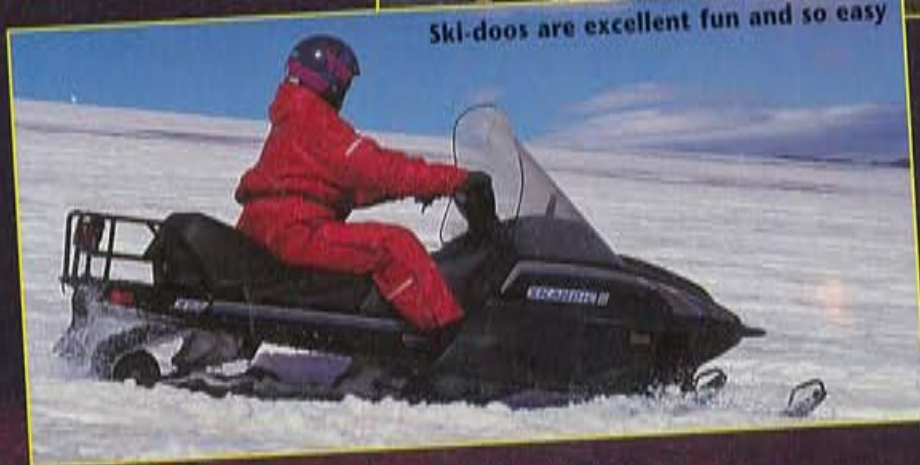
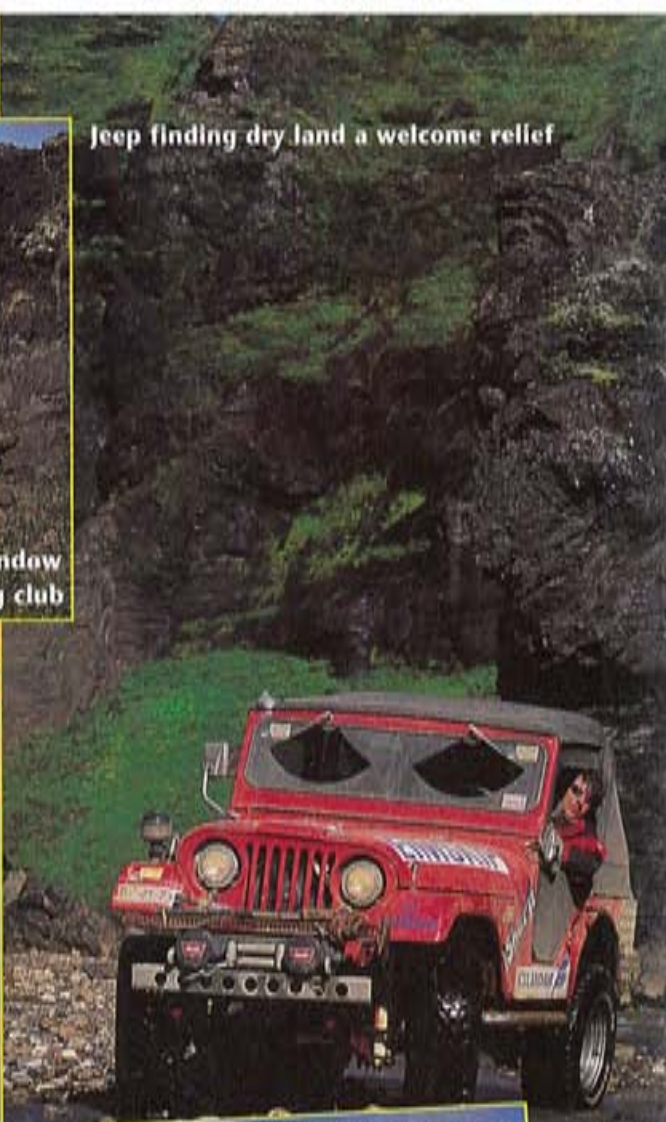
We stop for a picnic and are struck by the absolute silence of this land where nothing lives, the rain and fog adding to the depressing atmosphere.

We park the car and walk to the crater. It's so misty that we can't see the yellow



Through the round window is the local off-roading club

Jeep finding dry land a welcome relief



Ski-doo's are excellent fun and so easy

poles marking the way. As we enter the crater our footsteps echo oddly, as if the ground was hollow underfoot, and it takes us an hour to find the lake, an expanse of blue water that doesn't look like much more than a puddle in the corner of this 30-square-mile crater. Next to this blue lake is another smaller one, mint-green in colour and optimistically called 'Viti' – Icelandic for Hell, and we've been told it's the place to go for a swim. We didn't stay long.

### Don't go alone

Following some short cuts that were recommended by off-road club members – they actually took longer to cross but included much more fun off-roading – we arrived back in the south of the island where the big challenge is the valley of the Lonsoraefi, a glacial river spilling out into a delta.

We were about to find out why everyone had warned us not to go there.

The river is broader, deeper and faster-flowing than any other river we'd crossed before, so we sought out its broadest part. 'Cross square and go with the flow'

is the general advice for crossing rivers, but as we drive in we find the current is much stronger than we expected. The water sweeps right over the bonnet and the air intake comes dangerously close to the water.

Then I feel my seat getting wet, and at the same moment the car lifts off the ground – we're floating away and only halfway across.

Turn back? We couldn't have done even if we'd wanted to. Five metres further downstream there's solid ground under the wheels and we can drive on. There are other rivers to cross, almost as deep but none as scary.

Now we can drive up the valley, resplendently colourful among the sulphurous rocks in orange, yellow and green, the blue ice tongues of the

Vatnajökull glacier and the green moss covering exposed boulders. In the middle there's a 1000-metre climb. Instead of going round the mountain the trail leads straight over the top.

Over the other side was a broken-down tourist van. The Icelandic driver stared at our 40-year-old Jeep and asked amazed: 'Did you cross the river in that?'

After helping him repair his broken axle he described the right place to cross the water, where rocks help to keep cars on the ground. We managed the return trip without floating off again.

### Club Reykjavik

The rough valleys, volcanoes, glaciers, falls, rivers and hot springs of this remote yet accessible country made a deep impression on us. During our last week

## How to do it yourself

Iceland is six days away by sea, and it'll cost you around £800 to ship your off-roader from Immingham to Reykjavik. It may make sense to ship the car in advance and fly Icelandair from London, expect the air fare to be about £350 per person – less out of season. If you want to do this kind of real off-roading, it'll pay to contact the 4x4 Club Reykjavik or Icebreakers (Iceland 0354 1 567 1845) who will provide guidance and advice, plus guides for a small fee.

Beautifully sculptured ice showing nature at its best

we met up with members of the Icelandic 'Icebreakers' off-road club, and we joined them on a dusty, winding trail into the interior. We stopped at a small glacier and walked for hours through the snow in search of an ice cave that 'had to be here somewhere.'

Ice caves come into existence because the melting water forms underground rivers that flow out from under the glacier, melting it away as they run, forming caves which eventually grow too large to sustain themselves and collapse. Each year the caves form in different places, which is why you have to go looking for them.

The search was rewarded when we found a small entrance. Torches were lit and we waded through the running water, stooping to get in through the low opening.

The sight that awaited us was hard to believe. We were standing in a fairy-tale cathedral of ice, a cave over a hundred

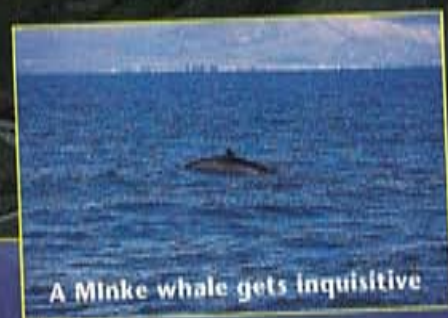
yards long with a waterfall crashing at one end, surreal round and square shapes everywhere. Rays of sunlight beaming through holes in the roof illuminated the interior with a strange blue light.

Outside it had started snowing, so it was a long trudge back to the cars. But there was still further to go, hours more driving into the island's bitter-cold interior. Then at last the Icelanders came to a halt, and proudly pointed to a white concrete building, standing in the middle of nowhere. It was a clubhouse, built by members of the 4x4 Club Reykjavik, a body with over 1000 members.

The building is luxurious, with its own generator for electricity and central heating, leather chairs and comfortable beds with thick mattresses.

We could never have imagined such a pleasant finale to our Icelandic break as we enthusiastically prepared marinated lamb chops and potatoes outside on a barbecue. We ate at a long table back in the warm clubhouse, exchanging all our most adventurous off-road stories while the wind howled outside.

We stood in a fairytale cathedral of ice with surreal round and square shapes and a strange blue light



If you like boats but hate the sea, here's the perfect answer

A Minke whale gets inquisitive



The spectacular valleys made a deep impression